

Is Project Management a Core Skill and No Longer a Niche Capability?

by Peter Taylor, The Lazy Project Manager; PMO Director at Siemens PLM Software

A smooth sea never made a skilled mariner. -- English Proverb

Project management is fast becoming the preferred way for companies to get things done. In a global economy project management will make a company more competitive than the traditional methods of managing work.

So for all managers there is now the need to understand the dynamics of projects together with the skill and process of project management in order to make the most out their organization's investments.

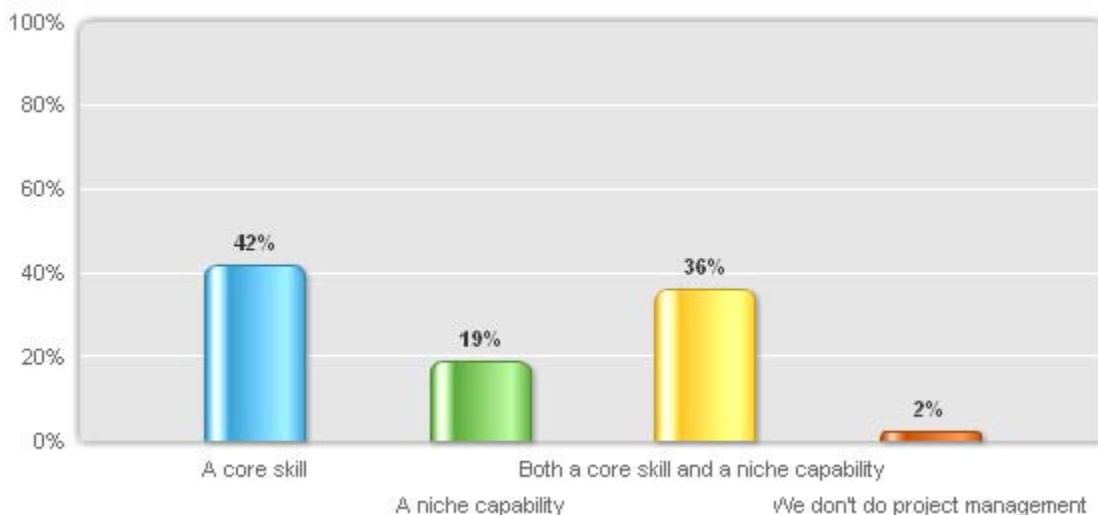
The Question

Is Project Management therefore no longer a niche capability, the home of project management office members and external contractors; is it now a core skill that all executives and senior management need to understand?

In a recent survey conducted by Peter Taylor (www.thelazyprojectmanager.com) through a LinkedIn survey (poll¹) That very question was asked, 'Is Project Management a core skill and no longer a niche capability?' to see what a wider community of business people thought.

347 people responded to the survey and I am grateful their time and consideration, as well as the follow up comments that many people left for me to review.

These are the results:



There is a fairly even split between 'A core skill' and 'Both a core skill and a niche capability' with a smaller number believing that it is 'A niche capability'. But I guess it would be fair to say that the survey contributors were divided in their views, and strongly divided in some cases based on the comments exchanged.

¹ LinkedIn Polls allow you to easily find answers to your business and market research questions. Target professionals with the right expertise, and then LinkedIn will analyze the results to show you how factors such as seniority, company size, job function, age and gender influence responses. You can distribute your poll for free to your network.

Before we analyze the responses in detail let me clear one thing up. In my open question on LinkedIn I mentioned the terms ‘project management’ and ‘profession’ in the same paragraph and, inevitably I guess, received some severe reprimands from some quarters. So for the sake of this article and discussion let’s not go there shall we? – forget the profession angle; I am happy to leave that to others.

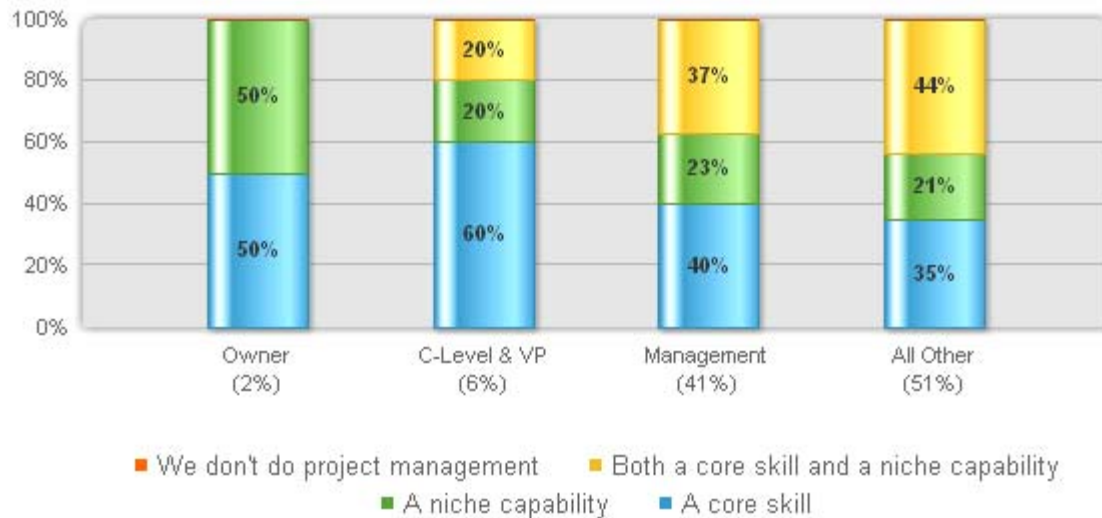
OK, it feels good to get that hot potato out of the way.

The Answer

So back to the survey; again a small caveat, there will be those of you out there that know more about how to correctly run statistical analysis and present such results, I don’t.

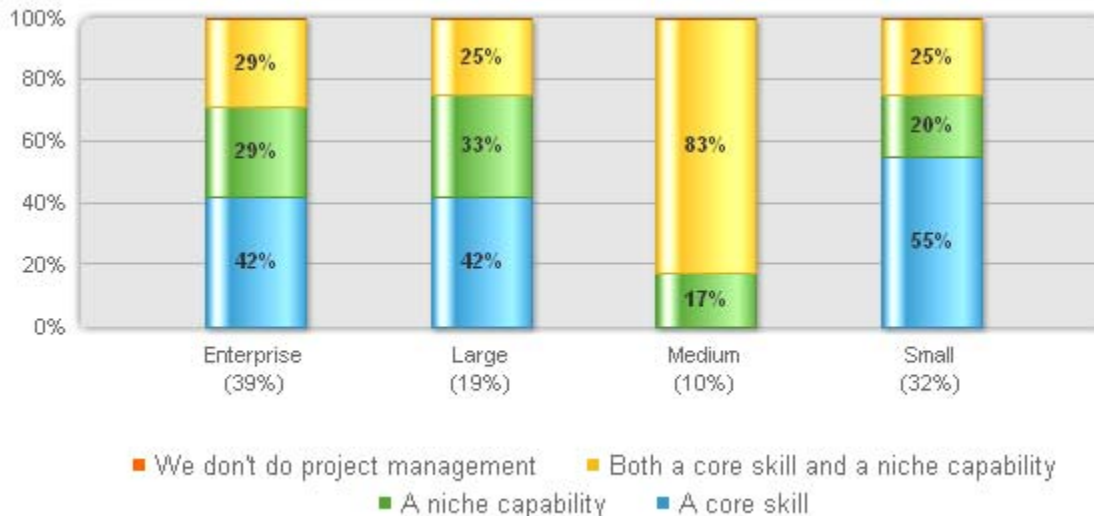
So when I say survey I mean that I asked the question and’ based on people’s poll votes and the LinkedIn analysis tools’ I assessed the output. This article describes both the results and my thoughts based on the wide feedback.

Job Title



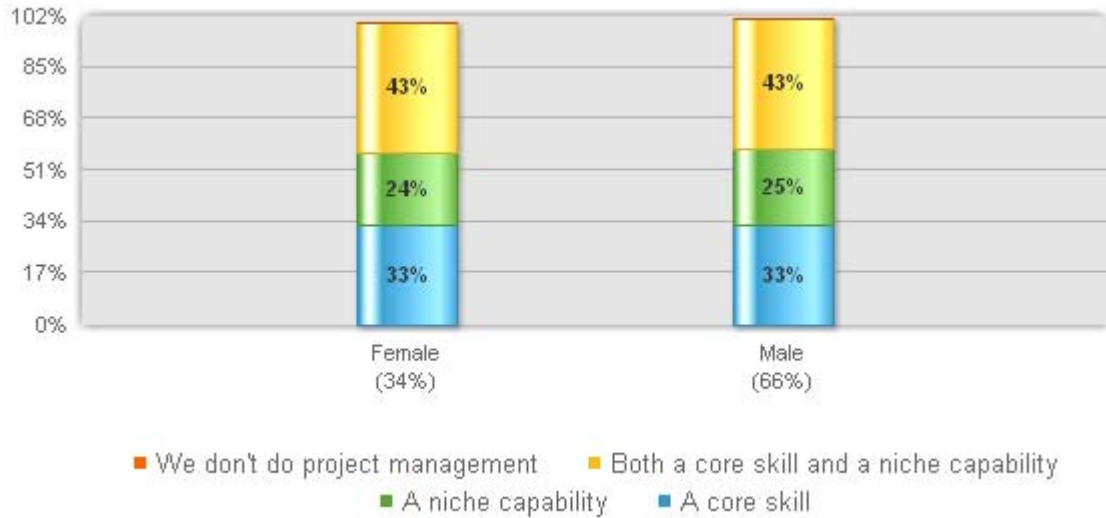
The above chart shows the votes cast by job title. Interestingly it appears that the higher up the organisation the clearer the division between the ‘niche’ and the ‘core’ views are. The lower the more there was a view that it was ‘both a core skill and a niche capability’.

Company Size



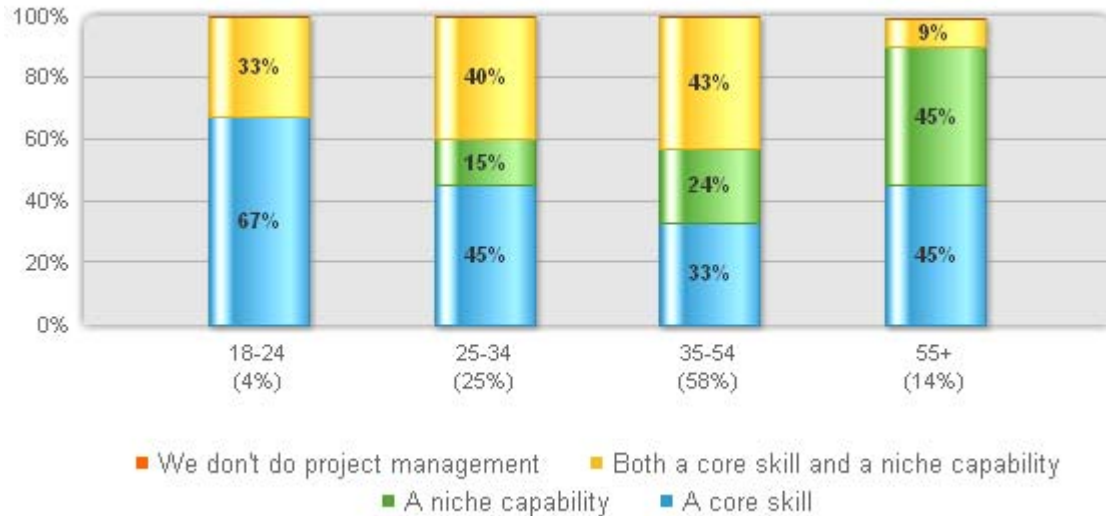
By company size it appears the small and the large/very large organisations have a mixed view but that medium companies either believe or employ those that act as 'both a core skill and a niche capability'. That said 71% of respondents came from organisations at either end of the size scale.

Gender



Gender played no part in these results with an almost identical view from both groups. That said it can be noted that the respondents were twice as likely to be men. I will say no more.

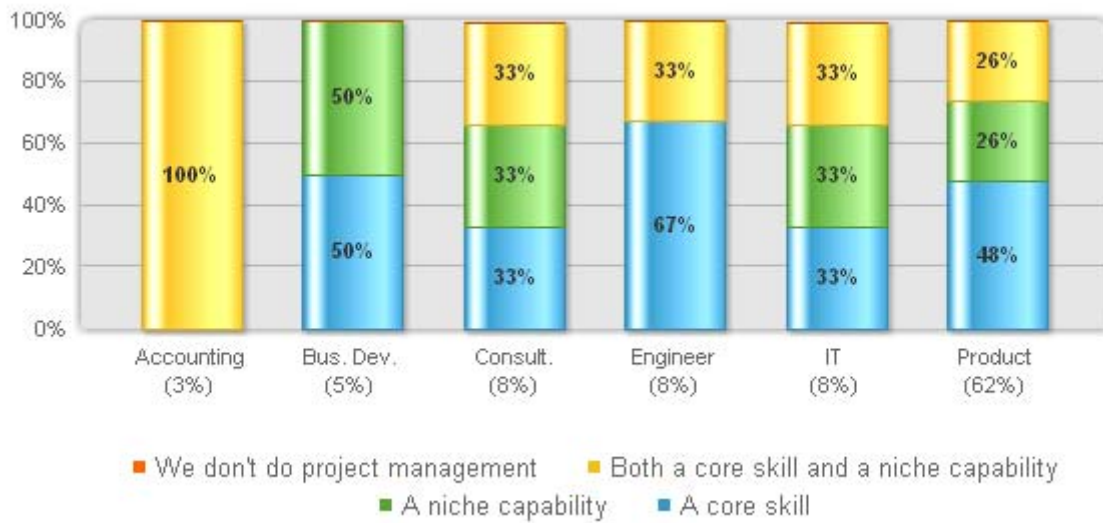
Age



So we have looked at gender but what about age? Well the majority of respondents were in the 25 to 54 age range (logical really) and the younger the viewpoint the more likely it was that there was a belief that it was a 'core skill' or the non-belief that it was a 'niche capability'. Was this as a result of the skills being gathered through the education process for business these days; that is project management being taught as one of the range of business skills?



Job Function



And finally a view by job function where I will leave you to read what you can into these statistics.

One view expressed was that everything - including project management - follows the same evolution curve from being a niche area with early innovators and adopters, then on to a wider acceptance and adoption followed by late adopters in mass number, resulting in moving the topic to become a commodity and possibly, at some future point, in to a decline. One must assume that project management is on this path somewhere.

Project Management is an interesting anomaly. The practice of project management has been around since well before the Romans began massive projects to reshape their world. However, the science and formalization of project management is relatively recent. Most of the current practices of a well trained project manager have been developed over only the past 70 years. So yes, we are on that path of maturity but precisely where I suggest forms the basis for this discussion.

The Argument

So what are my thoughts on this topic? Well let me argue from each of the three angles, and perhaps be a little tiny 'agent provocateur' in my thoughts:

- Project Management will always be a niche capability.
- It's about the skill and experience of the individual project manager that makes or breaks a project.
- The need for success means that projects have to be driven by a 'niche capable' project manager.
- General managers will never have the time, the experience or the training or indeed the skills to manage any project beyond that which is simple in its goals.
- No executive gets promoted because of their project management skills they get promoted for other reasons. Executives do not need project management skills but project sponsorship and product ownership skills.

Project Management is a core skill.

If you believe, as most evidence is now directing us, that we are moving to the projectification of society, where work is less and less a line activity and delivered in the majority through projects, then it is clearly vital that all managers now need to understand the dynamics of projects and have the basic skills and understanding of the process of project management in order to make the most out their organization's investments.

All managers need to think in terms of controlled and carefully monitored delivery of outcomes, against a fixed budget and expectations of a quality outcome i.e. as projects.

Both a Niche Capability and a Core Skill

Project management methodology is a 'core skill' that all managers need to be aware of but, the actual project management activity is still a 'niche capability' that requires additional training and experience in order to be successful.

Managing a small, simple project is no big deal and most people can do it. Managing a large, complex project with substantial risk, diverse stakeholders, a geographically distributed team, multiple constraints and high stakes is best reserved for real experts.

The successful business of the 21st century recognizes the value of 'niche' project managers working under a supportive executive that has a foundation of project 'core skills'.

A Final Thank You

Yes a huge thank you to so many of you on LinkedIn (what a great business tool it is when you invest a little amount of time getting to know what it can do) for the many, many contributions to this article and to this discussion.

Too many to name but all important enough to thank.

Let's keep the conversation going – whatever your views are, core skill, niche capability, a combination of both, I personally believe that project management is one exciting place (oh my I almost said profession, forgive me) to be in right now.

All comments and feedback welcome at www.thelazyprojectmanager.com.

'Discussion is an exchange of knowledge; argument an exchange of ignorance.'
--Robert Quillen

About the Author

Despite his title of 'The Lazy Project Manager', Peter Taylor is in fact a dynamic and commercially astute professional who has achieved notable success in project management, program management and the professional development of project managers: Currently as Director of a PMO at Siemens PLM Software, a global supplier of product lifecycle management solutions. He is an accomplished communicator and leader; always adopting a proactive and business-focused approach, and he is a professional speaker with City Speakers International.



He is also the author of 'The Lazy Project Manager' book (Infinite Ideas 2009) – for more information - www.thelazyprojectmanager.com. You can subscribe to a series of free podcasts on iTunes (The Lazy Project Manager).